Selecting an Internet Service Provider

The right service provider can make all the difference in your Internet experience.

By Kevin M. Savetz

Getting hooked to the Internet can be a relatively simple, painless experience. But for some people, plugging into the 'Net turns out to be a frustrating, expensive disaster. Ultimately, the key is to find the right Internet service provider.

Getting to the Internet for the first time usually isn't as simple as installing and logging onto Prodigy or America Online (unless, of course, you are using one of these services to access the 'Net—more on that later). The software isn't as user-friendly, and the manuals usually aren't as clearly written.

Once you're online, however, learning to use the Internet isn't difficult. If you're willing to experiment and learn, the Internet can become your new stomping ground. If you're impatient with technology or refuse to read manuals and use online help, however, the Internet probably isn't the place for you.

What to Look For

When shopping for an Internet service provider, it's important to find the right balance of price and features. High prices don't necessarily mean you're getting good service. Low prices don't always mean you're getting a good deal. For example, an extremely high price may indicate that the service provider is inexperienced or is offering a level of service beyond what you need. A very low price may also reflect inexperience on the part of the provider or indicate a lack of willingness to provide technical support.

Try, try, try to find a service provider that's a local telephone call from your home or place of business. If your host is not a local phone call from your location, you will have to pay long distance telephone charges.

What will your on-ramp to the Information Superhighway cost? Prices vary widely. Some services charge a flat, monthly fee—as little as $10 a month—for unlimited online time. Others charge an hourly fee, which amounts to an average of $20 to $25 per month for 20 hours of access.

If you can't find a service provider listed for your area, don't lose hope. Some

services allow nationwide access through a packet-switching network (like SprintNet), but these networks usually carry an added, hourly surcharge. Other networks are accessible through a toll-free number. Access via 800 lines or nationwide networks usually costs $5 to $8 an hour—much less appealing than the dollar-an-hour cost that's typical of local Internet service.

If you're lucky, you may be able to score free access from your school or business. Many schools and corporations offer free accounts to students and staff. Check with your computer center to learn about the online facilities available to you.

Less Than Complete Access

Not all service providers offer a full range of Internet functions. Some connections give you access to all of the Internet's services and tools, while others limit you to only electronic mail and Usenet. When considering your Internet needs, be sure to plan ahead. You may think you need only electronic mail now, but you will be disappointed later if you want to try ftp or gopher and discover you can't access those services.

What you'll actually see on the screen once you're online varies from service to service. There are hundreds of types of computers on the Internet—from tiny, personal computers to huge, behemoth mainframes—and each one looks different online. The service you choose may feature a sexy graphical interface, an attractive menu-driven interface or a decidedly plain UNIX prompt.

To enable your computer to talk to your Internet service provider, you'll need communications software. The software required depends on which computer system you're working on and what service you plan to use. Find out if the service provider supplies the software for free or an extra charge. If it doesn't, ask for suggestions on what software works best on the system.

There are two common types of connections to the Internet: dial-up access and SLIP or PPP accounts.

Dial-Up Access

Beginners will probably find a dial-up account (also referred to as a shell account) the easiest with which to start. With dial-up accounts, your computer has access to the service provider's computer, which is in turn hooked up to the Internet. This kind of third party access is very convenient because you don't have to install or configure any Internet software. You just use what has already been installed on the service provider's computer.

Dial-up accounts come in many different looks and variations. One of the most common variations is a command line system that provides you with either a simple, text-based, menu-driven interface or a DOS-like prompt. (It's really a

Figure 1: Delphi's Internet services utilize a text-based command line system.

UNIX or VMS prompt, not DOS.) Although it doesn't provide the prettiest interfaces, a command line system, such as the one used by Delphi, is inexpensive and has a similar look across different computing platforms. Even if you use a Mac at home and Windows at the office, Internet access via a command line system looks and feels the same.

If you want an elegant, point-and-click, graphical interface, command line access will make you miserable. On the other hand, you don't need a particularly fast modem or powerful computer to access the Internet with a command line. And since text can be sent much faster than graphics, this sort of access can keep your blood pressure down if you hate to wait.

As far as software is concerned, a basic terminal emulator (like *Procomm* or *Zterm*) is all you'll need for command line access. These programs are inexpensive and easy to set up.

Commercial Online Services

If you want a more graphical look on a dial-up account, you might want to try one of the national commercial services. All of the major services—such as CompuServe, Prodigy and America Online—are jumping on the Internet bandwagon by

Figure 2: America Online is one of the major services that provides Internet access.

providing Internet service with a graphical interface to their customers. Currently, however, very few of them offer full 'Net access. eWorld, for example, provides only for electronic mail but is planning to add other services. America Online offers e-mail, Usenet and gopher but not telnet.

Among the benefits of accessing the Internet via a commerical online service is the customized software that is provided free of charge or for a nominal fee. The software is usually blissfully simple to set up—and to use. Furthermore, online services are generally accessed as a local call from just about everywhere, and the technical support provided is usually pretty good.

On the downside, power users might feel constrained by the limited Internet access and the time-consuming, keep-it-simple-stupid interfaces.

Other Graphical Services

Also emerging on the Internet scene are smaller regional services that are providing higher levels of access (gopher, World Wide Web and search resources) and a graphical interface for their dial-up customers. The Pipeline, located in New York City, is one of the best examples of this type of service provider. It offers dial-up users a colorful, easy-to-install interface program, which allows you to ftp, gopher and—coming this spring—browse the Web.

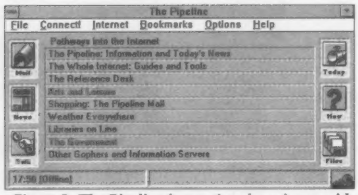

Figure 3: The Pipeline is a regional service provider that has a graphical user interface.

The main drawback to this type of service is that it is usually regional in nature, and users outside of that region must pay a long distance or SprintNet fee to use it.

SLIP and PPP Access

Once you've mastered the basics of the 'Net through a dial-up account, you may want to move on to a SLIP (Serial Line Internet Protocol) or PPP (Point to Point Protocol) account. With SLIP and PPP, you're not using the service provider's system as a point of access to the Internet—you're on it yourself.

With SLIP or PPP, you can cruise the Internet on high speed (provided you have a modem that's at least 9600 bps). You can use *Mosaic*, the lastest killer application, though some dial-up access providers can also give you *Mosaic*. You can use whatever applications you want because you provide your own Internet software.

This is also the downside of SLIP or PPP access. Because all of the software needed to access the 'Net must reside on your computer, you'll need to find it, install it and troubleshoot any problems yourself. However, it is becoming quite common for Internet access providers to offer SLIP or PPP users all the software they need to get started. Most providers are also providing more technical support to customers. Before signing up for this type of an account, ask the service provider if he provides software and support.

In order to get SLIP or PPP access, you'll need a powerful computer, such as a Macintosh or a computer running *Windows 3.1*. A color monitor, sound card and blazing-fast modem won't hurt either. This type of access makes your Internet experience truly multimedia, so the zippier your computer is, the better. As for cost, SLIP or PPP are usually more expensive than dial-up accounts, but not prohibitively so. You can expect to pay one or two dollars more per hour for access.

*FREE
INTERNET
GET ON THE INFORMATION SUPER HIGHWAY FOR FREE
GOPHER ★ TELNET
FTP ★ TRN ★ MAIL
★★FREE SLIP Accounts★★
DIAL UP *FREE
217-322-1111
Voice Help: 1-217-322-1212
All Nodes14.4K 8/N/1
*Regular Long Distance Charge Apply
FREENET BBS
717-445-1111
Lively Chat, Gif's Galore
Internet Mail, News Group
Service is FREE You pay L.D. Charge

Bulletin Board Systems

You may also be able to access the Internet using a local bulletin board system (BBS). Although there are tens of thousands of fine bulletin board systems around the world offering both dial-up and SLIP or PPP access, relatively few offer complete and reliable Internet access.

Finding a reliable BBS for accessing the Internet is truly a crap shoot. Anyone can run a bulletin board: the system operator behind the BBS may be a seasoned professional or a 12-year-old hacking away in his bedroom. Some BBSs are professional operations that charge for access; others are more fleeting. Some have dozens of telephone lines; many have only one or two. Bigger systems with more phone lines mean you'll get busy signals less frequently.

Most BBSs are not dedicated to providing Internet access – most of the time, BBSs have their own conferences for chatting and files for download. Internet access, if available, usually comes second to the board's own community. Some BBSs are part of networks other than the Internet (such as Fidonet or OneNet). Accept no imitations—demand the Internet by name.

Final Things to Know

Find out the fastest modem speed your host can support. Transferring a large file at 2400 bits per second can feel like agony, so get the fastest connection you can. If you'll be connecting via a packet-switching network, find out what modem speed the local hub of the network will support. Big cities typically have 9600 bps or faster access while rural communities typically have to make do with as little as 2400 bps.

Nothing in the world is more frustrating than trying to log in to check your electronic mail only to find that your host is down, the phone lines are busy, or network connectivity has been lost. Ask the service provider about system reliability. If you know anyone who uses the service (or can get references), ask that person what he thinks of the service.

Computers aren't the only component of a successful network – the people who use them make all the difference. While you are asking questions about a host's service, think about their support. Is the person on the other end of the conversation helpful and knowledgeable? Is he responsive to your questions and concerns? Is he willing to explain the simple stuff to you, or are you treated like a bother? Once you sign on the service, it is likely you will be asking many more questions. Be sure the technical support team is willing and able to assist. OA

ONLINE ACCESS has compiled a full list of Internet service providers. It is featured in ***Editor's Choice****, starting on page 84.*

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